

THE MOST INTERESTING THING:
DINA KELBERMAN'S *I'M GOOGLE*

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ABSTRACT

MORGAN MCKEEHAN: The Most Interesting Thing: Dina Kelberman's *I'm Google*
(Under the direction of Cary Levine)

Dina Kelberman's ongoing tumblr blog *I'm Google*, begun in 2011, gathers found images and videos into a continuous grid, placing thematically disparate but visually similar moments together to create what the artist describes as a visual representation of a common phenomenon fundamental to the World Wide Web: searching for obscure information and encountering unexpected results. Kelberman discovers the materials included in *I'm Google* through keyword searches that translate her questions about things and processes in the physical world into digital images via Google's image search. This paper examines Kelberman's use of online search in *I'm Google* as both process and motif. I argue that Kelberman's exploration of conceptual and technological aspects of searching for information online creates an artwork in which the viewer acts as an ontological system, forming relationships between items and developing an ordered domain of visual knowledge from the immense chaos of the World Wide Web.

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INTRODUCTION

Depending upon the day she discovers the website, a viewer finds a different initial view upon arriving at dinakelberman.tumblr.com. On any day, the blog presents a grid of photographs and imbedded videos in a clean white field with no overt context or explanation for the pictures. The overall sequence of images within the grid builds over time as Kelberman adds content to the top of the chain, but the grid's dimensions are fixed: three across, by a vertical quantity determined by the size of the computer screen or device on which the blog is viewed. Viewers familiar with infinite scroll will immediately recognize that the framing boundaries of the screen do not indicate a finite edge to the work; one is looking at the uppermost limit of a vertical sequence of indeterminate length. As the viewer scrolls down the page, the site continuously loads photos, transforming the initial static group of approximately fifteen pictures into an unbounded but incremental stream of one visual idea to the next.

The viewer's presumed awareness of this webpage as a tumblr site, as well as previous knowledge from interactions with similarly structured sites, provides an implicit suggestion of how the grid of images is meant to be read. The upper-left corner of a web page generally imports from English-language texts the function of the sequence's starting point. At this location, a viewer arriving on December 1, 2014 would have identified as the grid's first image a bright orange ball roughly in the center of a mid-toned rectangular photo. (fig. 1:

<http://dinakelberman.tumblr.com/>) Reading from left to right, across each row and then

skipping down to resume reading at the left edge of the next row, the group of photos reveals an internal logic. As the eye scans from the first image to its neighbor, the ball's molten glow slightly intensifies, and the rectangle of the surface beneath the ball melts itself, becoming a soft gooey pillow of foam. Even while assessing this development, the viewer may read the foam-pillow as in fact a deflated cube, influenced by the next image in sequence, in which the molten orange ball is half-submerged in a structurally sound container-foam-cube.

As the viewer continues scanning from one image to the next, through and around the grid, each image informs her reading of its neighbors via their visual relationships. One recognizes what is happening, even if attempting to translate the events into words entails resorting to awkward strings of appended descriptors. From the first image introducing the concept of "molten orange lump," we follow the lump's progress from one setting to the next; a purely visual logic among elements carries the viewer through a continual transformation between pictures, until, with a deft change of subject, the viewer lands unexpectedly inside a picture for which there are again rational terms: ten images later, the orange circle shifts slightly to the right and down within the framing border of the photo, and from one juxtaposed photo to the next, a nearly identical configuration of pixels on the screen mutates from an orange sphere grasped by tweezers, to the yolk of an egg. Recognizable, nameable, containable within a single finite noun: yolk.

From this opening into verbal language, the sequence continues through pictures for which there are a steady supply of apt identifiers. More eggs: three, four, four again, eggs in a bowl, eggs crowded, eggs with more room, even more eggs, and more (a comical amount of

yolks in one container! what will be done with all of these eggs?), foamy eggs, eggs in a square, eggs in a diamond, eggs dispersed, eggs on a plate, eggs looking strangely small inside a large container (what kind of poultry produced these tiny yolks?), eggs deep inside a disproportionate quantity of whites, eggs cupped in a hand, eggs between two hands...until, emerging from this readily-nameable litany to an image of a yolk-colored blob which looks suspiciously not like an egg at all, positioned as it is strangely flat and dull inside the palm of a hand with fingers splayed in a way unusual for hands cupping eggs, the sequence resumes an entirely visual logic, rendering verbal descriptions nonsensical and fumbling once more.

How does this contextless sequence of images read so legibly as visual logic? What is it that feels so familiar in this strange visual narrative?

The work's title, *I'm Google*, visible in the browser tab, provides a clue. In the drifting from one image to the next, from a given starting point to a connected but unexpected landing many steps later, the viewer may begin to recognize a familiar sensation, and identify as its source a phenomenon which has become increasingly automatic in contemporary online experience: the iterative, associative process of rambling from one idea to the next through an endless chain of associations and permutations within the World Wide Web.

This paper explores Dina Kelberman's use of online search as both process and motif to create an artwork which mirrors the "impulsive-yet-not-random, thematic internet navigational trajectory" known as going down the internet tunnel, or getting lost on the Web.¹ All of the images and videos in *I'm Google* are found through keyword searches through which

¹Brandon Scott Gorell, "Proposed Additions to the Internet Lexicon," *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, <http://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/proposed-additions-to-the-internet-lexicon>.

Kelberman translates questions about things and processes in the physical world to digital images via Google's link-based image search. As found photography, the themes Kelberman explores are shaped by the visual environment which is their source as well as their medium, but the borders outlining this domain of knowledge are drawn at the intersection of the artist's personal preoccupations in subject matter and imagery with the vast miscellany of the Web. Movement within this domain takes place via transitions from one image to the next established by visual and conceptual associations; the viewer acts as an ontological system forming relationships between and among items. The order emerging from this ontology reflects ongoing issues for accessing information on the Web, such as the implications of differences in how humans and machines read images for the development of precise search and retrieval strategies. Through her explorations of the conceptual and technological aspects of searching for information online, in *I'm Google* Dina Kelberman creates an ontologically-ordered domain of visual knowledge from the immense chaos of the Web.

DOWN THE K-HOLE

Kelberman's blog has received an enthusiastic reception within a popular online press which readily identifies with the blog's depiction of, and potential as a means for, losing oneself lost in thought. Like *I'm Google* itself, critical responses to the blog draw upon varied vocabularies including information science, art history, and internet slang to describe the artwork's exploration of search as a medium for art. The range of terminologies applied to the blog reflects the layers within its metaphor for the world of information online. A short piece on *I'm Google* at *Wired's* website frames Kelberman's work in the language of library and information science: Kelberman as a research librarian offers advice on researching topics by keywords.² A critic for *Art21's* blog places Kelberman in the context of an argument that contemporary artmaking is inevitably archival: at present, "being an artist means negotiating the vast digital library that we, as a global culture, have created for ourselves."³

Reviewers often mention the wordless absorption in perusing subtle developments inside the blog's array of colors, textures, and material pleasures, its "satisfaction for the eye."⁴ Indeed, the blog's stream of images exploits the unprecedented ability of the Web to deliver

² Jakob Schiller, "Google Image Algorithms Still No Match for Human Powers of Association," *WIRED*, April 11, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/2013/04/dina-kelberman-im-google/>.

³ Joy Garnett, "They Are the World," *ART21 Magazine*. Accessed August 30, 2014, <http://blog.art21.org/2013/10/08/they-are-the-world/fig-5-kelberman-imgoogle/>.

⁴ Teju Cole, "The Atlas of Affect," *The New Inquiry*, July 7, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/dtake/the-atlas-of-affect/>.

the immensity and variety of the physical world, for cheap, in a highly compressed format. An essential element of the work's ability to conjure the absorbing and disorienting aspect of losing time searching the Web stems from its use of digital media to conjure analogies to physical experiences in the imagination of the viewer; much of the work's compelling quality results from the simple pleasure of investigating the world of physical objects without the burden of materiality. In particular, the blog's repeated depictions of materials, activities, and processes at all scales, from the enormity of industrial manufacturing, cavernous sports arenas, agricultural operations and artifacts, and vast heaps of all manner of detritus, to the intricate gestures of hands-- building models, stretching putty, cutting, placing, tweezing, drawing--of hands doing *anything*, provide dizzying shifts in scale from the expansive to the minute.

In a review for the *New Inquiry* website, Teju Cole takes this catalog aspect of the work as a point of departure, describing *I'm Google* as an endless list detailing "the world of things," and necessarily endless "because the world of things never ends."⁵ This list-making quality of *I'm Google's* use of images provokes an experience of pictures which is linear and sequential, moving from one thing to the next and the next in a one-directional manner. However, in addition to using images as lists, Cole also sees in the blog "the dialectical use of images which became one of the standard gestures of the art of the twentieth century," reinterpreted via the Web in the 21st.⁶

The comparison Cole creates between *I'm Google* and Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas Micromega* suggests the expansiveness as well as the limitations of

⁵ Teju Cole, "The Atlas of Affect."

⁶ Teju Cole, "The Atlas of Affect."

the dialectical movement within Kelberman's work in relation to previous taxonomies.

Whereas in Richter's taxonomies, meaning stays relatively narrowly defined within a given panel or group of images tethered to elaboration within a theme, in reading *I'm Google* one maps these connections the way one experiences hyperlinks on the Web, moving relentlessly through imagined space and real time. Applying the dialectical relationship between images to this movement causes each subsequent item in the list to refer backwards to inform its predecessor, while also carrying this meaning forward into the following image, and the next, and the next. On the other hand, Cole reminds a viewer seduced by the transporting quality of the blog to reconsider the content provided by these sources. In contrast to the iconographic, thematic, and emotional richness of Warburg's effort to map the traces of Renaissance art and cosmography in the cultural memory of his own time and place, the blog's reference points are perversely limited by the commercial and vernacular qualities of source materials drawn from the Web, which define the visual world built by Kelberman's project.⁷ The geography discovered in Kelberman's "atlas of affect" results from mapping connections between "images in conversation with other images," onto a terrain that "only Google could make possible."

Regardless of the value of the items within its catalog, however, the blog demonstrates the way in which the endlessness of the world of things fascinates through sheer endlessness alone. In the infinite nature of the possible relationships represented, one keeps looking simply to discover what else might be found. Another early admirer of the blog, Robert Krulwich of NPR, compared the irresistible pull of continuing to scroll on *I'm Google* to the addictive quality

⁷ Christopher Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Library, 2012), 10.

of the Web itself. Within the Web's endless chain of linked things, the lure of "next," the urge to keep looking out of the intense fascination with what other possibilities may present themselves, proves difficult to ignore.⁸

The links between images in *I'm Google* thus operate as the lure of "next" which is inherent to the architecture of the Web, and to the pursuit of answers within that space. Built as one-way links between documents, the Web's structure has evolved through references which are metaphors themselves: the text of a hyperlink points to another point in information space which contains more information about whatever the reader is currently absorbed in. As a reviewer for the *Paper* magazine website, Hazel Cills, remarks, viewing *I'm Google* produces a chain of associations similar to the experience of following connections on the Web, one link leading to another until "suddenly you're reading about alien abductions (on Wikipedia)".⁹ Wikipedia in particular, as an encyclopedic collection of links assembling content-based connections across a widely distributed authorship, provides a particularly apt text-based reference point for *I'm Google*, and a similarly commonly-cited source of lost time.

Invoking an unsettling resemblance to the sensory dislocations of madness or drug-induced dissociation within the Web's transporting capacity for distraction, Cills invokes the slang term "internet k-hole" to describe the disorienting effect of time spent perusing connections within Kelberman's blog.¹⁰ *McSweeney's* "List of Proposed Additions to the

⁸ Robert Krulwich, "Trapped By The Web — But For How Long? Take the Kelberman Challenge," *NPR.org*, Accessed December 23, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/krulwich/2013/04/01/175913931/trapped-by-the-web-but-for-how-long-take-the-kelberman-challenge>.

⁹ Hazel Cills, "Dina Kelberman's 'I'm Google' Finds the Art in Web Surfing," *Paper Magazine*, n.d., http://www.papermag.com/2013/04/dina_kelbermans_im_google_find.php.

¹⁰ Hazel Cills, "Dina Kelberman's 'I'm Google' Finds the Art in Web Surfing."

Internet Lexicon” at the magazine’s website defines “internet k-hole” as a synonym for “internet tunnel,” an unanticipated link-driven information pathway so absorbing that one emerges from it far from the entrance, or initiating piece of content, unable to remember the original purpose for going online in the first place.¹¹ The addition of ketamine to the concept of the tunnel suggests the experiential proximity between this common phenomenon and the symptoms of bodily dissociation, lost time and impaired memory, in the acute attentional disorder observed among human recreational users of the powerful veterinary anesthetic.¹²

Paradoxically, this loss of control results from the seduction of a system based on order, from human helplessness to resist pursuing the connections offered by the Web. Kelberman herself has observed about the blog’s popularity: “I think there is something inherently pleasing when things are categorized. It’s easier to deal with the universe if we catalog it.”¹³ The compelling lure of order itself induces this state of dissociation which is recognizable and widespread, and has spawned its own lists of synonyms. In Krulwich’s words, “Everybody’s been trapped by the Web.”¹⁴

¹¹ Brandon Scott Gorell, “Proposed additions to the internet lexicon,” *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, <http://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/proposed-additions-to-the-internet-lexicon>.

¹² Valerie H. Curran and Lisa Monaghan, “In and out of the K-Hole: A Comparison of the Acute and Residual Effects of Ketamine in Frequent and Infrequent Ketamine Users,” *Addiction* 96, no. 5 (May 1, 2001), 749–60.

¹³ Dina Kelberman, quoted in Jakob Schiller, “Google Image Algorithms Still No Match for Human Powers of Association.”

¹⁴ Robert Krulwich, “Trapped By The Web — But For How Long? Take the Kelberman Challenge.”

WHAT IS AN ONTOLOGY AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Constructing relationships between images in *I'm Google*, a viewer travels through associations analogous to information pathways she may have experienced in her own independent navigations of the Web. The viewer creates a visual ontology constructing a flexible and ongoing organizational system within this domain of information. Kelberman's blog may therefore be read as a visual metaphor for the kind of order which is absent from the intrinsic architecture of the Web, but which humans create when making sense of its links through searching for information online.

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, he developed its structure on a principle of absolute freedom for contributors. Anyone should be able to add to the Web by simply linking to anything that was already there, with no requirement to request permission or to legitimate or even define the connection between linked documents.¹⁵ The connections one discovers between items on the Web therefore demonstrate an unfolding purely associative architecture, in which each one-way hyperlink represents someone's unnamed conceptual link. Utterly lacking a unifying framework, these connections are impossible to categorize as a

¹⁵ Tim Berners-Lee, "WorldWideWeb: Proposal for a HyperText Project," *World Wide Web Consortium*, November 12, 1990, <http://www.w3.org/Proposal.html>.

coherent system; about the resultant “ordering” of information on the Web, David Weinberger has written that nothing, “no dorm room, divorce, or political scandal” is as messy.¹⁶

If the Web’s open structure allows anyone to add absolutely anything, the possibilities for what may be deposited are limitless, but the anarchic organization poses tremendous difficulties for ever finding these contributions in practice. As a remedy to this situation, Berners-Lee has long advocated for integrating the existing Web with an ontological organizational structure which would improve the linkage of human-readable documents comprising the Web by describing connections with embedded machine-readable data.¹⁷ Ontologies “define the terms used to describe and represent an area of knowledge,” but develop these definitions as flexible systems of relationships in response to the particular descriptive needs of a given domain; thus the system and the terms emerge in a reciprocal fashion through the accumulation of descriptive relationships.¹⁸ Making a case for the potential of these systems to organize large stores of content and thereby enable knowledge sharing, in “What Are Ontologies and Why Do We Need Them?” Chandrasekaran, Josephson, and Benjamins explored the possible role for ontologies as a bridge between natural language and artificial intelligence.¹⁹ Berners-Lee’s argument for the Semantic Web endorses ontologies

¹⁶ David Weinberger, *Everything Is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 2007), 189.

¹⁷ Tim Berners-Lee, James Hendler, and Ora Lassila, “The Semantic Web,” *Scientific American* 284, no. 5 (2001), 28-37.

¹⁸ “OWL Web Ontology Language Use Cases and Requirements: W3C Recommendation,” *World Wide Web Consortium*, 10 February 2004, <http://www.w3.org/TR/2004/REC-webont-reg-20040210/>.

¹⁹ B. Chandrasekaran, J.R. Josephson, and V.R. Benjamins, “What Are Ontologies, and Why Do We need Them?,” *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 14, no. 1 (1999), 21.

because of the flexibility of this organizational method, the potential to provide order while preserving the openness of the Web by not limiting the kinds of questions that can be asked of the possible links between items.²⁰ The ideal of a Semantic Web has not been swiftly implemented in practice, however.²¹

In the absence of an overall ordering system for information on the Web, search engines developed to provide increasingly adept mechanisms for reconciling human and machine capacities for reading and interpreting information. The range of strategies implemented by search engines in the mid-late nineties reflect experimentation with various methods to best navigate the many kinds of connections that developed between documents, focusing first on text-based search for text documents.²² During this period Google distinguished itself by a method of evaluating relevance, and thus rankings for search results, based on the numbers of incoming links a given page had.²³

The relatively recent development of the Web as a vast but searchable repository of images enables Kelberman to gather the content of *I'm Google*. Although the ability to look for pictures online has become so integrated into Web culture as to be taken for granted, Kelberman's way of using pictures relies on search capabilities which have developed swiftly over the past 15 years; the invention and refinement of searching on the Web provides the

²⁰ Tim Berners-Lee, James Hendler, and Ora Lassila, "The Semantic Web," 29.

²¹ N. Shadbolt, W. Hall, and T. Berners-Lee, "The Semantic Web Revisited," *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 21, no. 3 (January 2006), 96.

²² Dale J. Vidmar, "Darwin on the Web: The Evolution of Search Tools," *Computers in Libraries* 19, no. 5 (May 1999), 24.

²³ Members of the Clever Project. "Hypersearching the Web." *Scientific American* 280, Issue 6 (1999), 44.

historical context for her tools. With the invention of image search tools, the visual scope and variety of the Web presented itself, revealing unexpected visual associations for any given topic, and allowing access to the quantity of materials needed to provide the granularity of differences such as Kelberman is able to discover in her image searches. In their sheer quantity and diversity as well as their remarkable granularity of difference, the images through which Kelberman accomplishes the blog's transitions reflect her mining of the Web as a vast and miscellaneous resource. A short piece which appeared in the *New York Times* on July 12, 2001 captures the excitement of the early days of image search, reporting Google's unveiling of "Google Image Search, a nifty new tool that lets you search for the pictures embedded in Web pages."²⁴ The article reflects how this tool offered a new perspective on the enormity of the Web's knowledge and the possibility for variety within this scope, citing the example of an image search for Bill Gates which produced more than 2500 results, including "corporate head shots, the mug shot from a 1977 traffic arrest and an image taken seconds after he was hit in the face with a pie a few years ago."²⁵

²⁴ Andrew Zipern, "NEWS WATCH; A Quick Way to Search For Images on the Web," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/12/technology/news-watch-a-quick-way-to-search-for-images-on-the-web.html>.

²⁵ Andrew Zipern, "NEWS WATCH; A Quick Way to Search For Images on the Web."

LINKS

The development of ontological relationships within the chain of connections of *I'm Google* begins with Kelberman's image searches, which translate text-based keywords into pictures of those ideas. From these starting points, Kelberman builds the sequences of relationships between images that form the precisely constructed visual and conceptual links in an unbroken series. In an essay for the catalogue of Kelberman's 2014 exhibit at the CUE art foundation, Stephanie Barber writes, "These transitions are where the real magic of the piece is." In the leaps between concepts, "Kelberman has simultaneously compressed and expanded these images' potential. An impressive sleight of hand."²⁶ The juxtapositions Kelberman creates draw upon the viewer's ability to read images in multiple ways; the varieties of links reflect the distinguishing feature of ontologies: the capability for developing many kinds of possible relationships between entities.

The shift from one image to the next in the grid across visual and conceptual associations constitutes the individual unit of meaning in the seamless passage between ideas. Images linked by visual properties share similarities in the color, number, size, or shape of parts within photographs, as well as subtler characteristics such as depth of field and echoes in texture, pattern, or visual density. Conceptual connections often use these visual properties as a solid background for a more subtle shift premised in the viewer's understanding of an object's

²⁶ Stephanie Barber, "Dina Kelberman's I'm Google," *ART21 Magazine*, Accessed October 31, 2014, <http://blog.art21.org/2014/09/03/dina-kelbermans-im-google/>.

function or nameable identity. This palette of relationships provides fluidity in the range of transitions.

In the sequence described in the introduction to this paper, for example, Kelberman establishes a visual constant and explores a range of variations on this idea. Establishing the size, shape, and color of the orange circle as a visual idea provides the link to yolk through similarities in the properties of these forms as images. From a starting point with a single yolk she multiplies the established visual idea, progressing through the range of eggs by multiplying the number of observed forms from one yolk to many and back again, to a single one held in the hand. The following transition, from yolk to putty, then explores a parallel axis to the original shift from ball to yolk: similar shape, different color.

Transitions operating via the viewer's conceptual recognition of an object allow Kelberman to shift to a new idea or different type of material. Further along in the sequence described above, the sequence evolves into a series of stick-models, three-dimensional lattices constructed from lines and joints. (fig. 2: <http://dinakelberman.tumblr.com/>) Initially collecting models constructed of wooden skewers, the sequence mutates into models built from stiff sticks of dried spaghetti. The idea of "pasta" provides the link between the models and a mess of looping noodles. In the image which accomplishes the transition, the spaghetti sticks are gathered into a pile near the center of the photograph; collecting the forms close to each other intensifies subtle differences in tone: the precise color and slight translucency of semolina becomes more identifiable. (fig. 3: <http://dinakelberman.tumblr.com/>) Establishing this concept allows the transition to the next image, which is visually very different, but

comprehensible because it's simply a disorderly cooked pile-- curvy, paler-- of the building blocks of the model. Pasta becomes spaghetti.

Visual and conceptual connections are not mutually exclusive in this work, but overlapping attributes. As in faceted classification systems, sequences may be evaluated as slices through the dataset along specific axes, focusing on particular types of relationships between entities. The visual nature of *I'm Google's* data array makes it possible to present many axes simultaneously; transitions rely on these layered relationships to a greater or lesser degree. In the passage just described, for example, the held concept of pasta allows the visual passage from raw to cooked, but other visual properties also provide a steady backdrop for this transition. The background blue of the work table established in the two preceding images, which recurs in the new situation in hue and even direction of its orientation, offers a visual bridge supporting the conceptual path. Linking the images one to the next sometimes has the effect of distilling a particular aspect within an image, sharpening an area of focus and enlarging its impact.

Kelberman uses this principle to generate recurring themes and associations in her webs of images, and to exploit the ambiguity of established but latent ideas weaving in and out of visual presentness. Returning to the models-spaghetti sequence: from the tangled masses of looping soft pasta, the sequence introduces and turns away from the idea of the strands as yarn through courting and negating visual resemblance. (fig. 4: <http://dinakelberman.tumblr.com/>) From a chubby toddler's hand buried in sticky, tomato sauce-covered spaghetti, the following image includes just enough of a figure to introduce the concept of a child at bathtime: the soft

draped lines which had been noodles become yarn, aided by color that echoes the tomato sauce but moves more toward a synthetic hue of dyed pink and coral. The disorienting series of photographs that follows alternates between pasta and yarn via context. In one photograph, the culinary association of a colander provokes the mind to imagine pasta, while the synthetic red hue of the strands inside convinces the eye of yarn. Four following images confirm the image of yarn in dyebaths, while the stove in the background maintains the possibility of cooking spaghetti, echoed by the bundles' partial immersion in a dye bath that perversely turns their shade from semolina to marinara. The staccato effect of these contrasting interpretations finally arrives at a stable identity when the sequence resolves in a series of images of yarn indeed, recognizable in form and texture as twisted ochre skeins.

The visual ontology of *I'm Google* also grows out of tumblr's unique characteristics as a medium for contemporary art, reflecting Kelberman's adoption of the blogging site's software for the nearly effortless creation of websites collecting content culled from the web, as well as her points of resistance to other common trends within this medium. Tumblr is both a reflection and an outgrowth of the tremendous increase in online content over the past ten years, as well as a continuation of the overall proliferation of images in American culture via first print and then digital photography. Tumblr websites reside outside of traditional structures for the production and consumption of contemporary American art; instead of being accessed through galleries, museums, or institutionally produced online sites, these artworks are accessed at each blog's individual URL within tumblr, or via the user's tumblr dashboard.

The properties Kelberman uses in tumblr reflect her longstanding commitment to artmaking as an inexpensive and accessible activity utilizing whatever resources are plentiful

and ready to hand, and her interest in artwork that “any given person can make.”²⁷ In previous works in sculpture, drawing, painting, and digital photography, this commitment meant choosing inexpensive, non-art materials and exploring themes and subject matter drawn from her everyday life and immediate urban surroundings. Kelberman embraces tumblr as an “egalitarian” approach to making art in the digital realm; the site’s software provides an accessible and cheap medium for gathering content from widely distributed sources and de-emphasizing single authorship in a proprietary sense.²⁸

When she selected a web hosting platform for *I’m Google* in 2011, Kelberman chose tumblr because it offered a simple and free already-established venue for building and hosting a website; the availability of the blogging site’s software to anyone who wished to sign up for an account extended her commitment to accessibility within the online environment. Tumblr’s clean, streamlined aesthetic offered a non-distracting visual environment for presenting her artwork. She also continued her embrace of pre-existing materials by choosing a readymade template offered for free on the tumblr site, which supplied its current simple format of three images across and an indefinite vertical scroll.²⁹

Tumblr’s easy-to-use interface and provision of pre-made templates lowers technological barriers to participation in the culture of the Web; learning to code is no longer necessary for a user to make a website for artwork. If technological expertise is not demanded

²⁷Dina Kelberman, “Artist’s talk”, May 2012, Accessed at: <http://sophiajacob.com/index.php?/root/dina-kelberman/>.

²⁸Dina Kelberman, “Artist’s talk”.

²⁹ Kelberman chose the format when she started the blog in 2011. Although there have been a few modifications, the overall aesthetic was predetermined. Dina Kelberman, (artist) in conversation with the author, December 2014.

in the making of these works, tumblr sites also deserve evaluation in accordance with Domenico Quaranta's argument against the "outdated prejudice" of critics insisting that interpreting new media art requires specific media literacy. As Quaranta argues, the need for specific media literacy is now no more true for new media works than for works in any media; criticism that fails to read these works as integrated with mainstream media enforces an artificial separation which obstructs adequate recognition of these works' participation within the scope of contemporary culture.³⁰

By the same token, the software's ease of use and the ready availability of pre-existing, professionally-developed templates also represents the danger of a limited engagement with the online medium as a language with imbedded meanings. Lev Manovich expressed concern about the possibility for complacency within these practices in user-generated content; in 2008, Manovich asked, "does this mean that people's identities and imaginations are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than they were in the twentieth century?"³¹ In comparison to the independent experiments within net art communities in the early nineties, Dieter Daniels has also described the illusion of agency offered by user-generated content on commercial sites as a "corporate-guided, fake independence."³²

In the case of *I'm Google*, however, Kelberman deliberately selected the pre-existing format as a platform for experimenting with the conventions of the new medium itself: the

³⁰ Domenico Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art*, Accessed March 7, 2015. <http://linkeditions.tumblr.com/beyondnma>, 218.

³¹ Lev Manovich, "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?" *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 1, 2009), 321.

³² Dieter Daniels, *Net Pioneers 1.0 : Contextualizing Early Net-based Art*, (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), 60.

language of shared photographic collections in online social media. Kelberman's practice of arranging images of objects in an infinitely scrolling grid evolved through a confluence between her interest in common, everyday objects and building materials as subject matter and her idea for a visual joke which depended upon the social conventions and visual format of a social media website. Kelberman's investigations of everyday objects began with literal objects in the material world, in early sculptural assemblages which she has described as "taking stupid, inconsequential objects and making interesting simple forms out of them."³³ Meanwhile, her developing habit of "collecting photos I found beautiful and storing them by theme" in folders on her computer generated a large supply of digital images, replicating the concerns of her sculptures in a more portable means that did not produce large, unwieldy objects that later needed to be stored, transported, or otherwise accounted for.³⁴

Pursuing her interest in readymades as subject matter through photographic investigations of these images led to works such as "The Thing Itself" from 2008 (fig.5: *The Thing Itself*, 2008, <http://dinakelberman.com/>), a series of paintings in gouache and white-out on 8.5 x 11" inkjet printouts, in which Kelberman experimented with manipulating images of objects into increasingly less familiar states by degrees, until the familiar takes on a mysterious off-kilter aspect. As her practice of collecting and arranging photographic images became more important than producing printed versions of individual images, exploring relationships between images on her computer screen became the medium for her project. Recounting the idea for a project called "Facebook Albums", Kelberman described how she had been looking at

³³Dina Kelberman, "Artist's talk".

³⁴Dina Kelberman, "(Dina Kelberman)," (Artist's website), <http://dinakelberman.com/>.

pictures of scaffolding and observed that the scaffolding was always standing in front of something else, like people's photos of themselves on vacation, in which the people are always standing in front of the destination, the object of the photograph. This connection inspired Kelberman to create an album of scaffolding photos within Facebook entitled "Vacation Pictures." (fig. 6: "Vacation Pictures" in *Facebook Albums*, 2010-2011, <http://dinakelberman.com/>)

The source material for *I'm Google* accumulated naturally out of Kelberman's process of collecting the photographs that evolved during these projects. As she expanded her collections, assembling albums through gathering and sequencing photographs into regular grids of images reoriented Kelberman's thinking from the relationship of each photograph to the originating idea, to the visual connections between photographs revealed by the grid as an organizing principle for incremental difference. "My Plans," an album which gathered a handful of images grouped around the chromatic theme of flowing cadmium red: lava, latex paint, airbrush dropcloth, laid the foundation for a longer sequence of things unlike thematically, but visually related. (fig. 7: "My Plans" in *Facebook Albums*, 2010-2011, <http://dinakelberman.com/>)

Kelberman has emphasized that she did not initially did not think of the project as "a real thing;" she simply found the sequential blog format appropriate for exploring the possibilities she discovered in "Facebook Albums:" building sequences of images guided by visual relationships between thematically disparate images.³⁵ Thus, working within the pre-supplied template did not limit Kelberman's art to a "corporate-guided fake independence", but gave her insight into the visual form she was using, and allowed her to develop these

³⁵ Dina Kelberman, (artist) in conversation with the author, December 2014.

connections into a visual metaphor for the Web itself. As she began to engage with the collecting process more consciously, she refined the process by identifying rules that she had already adopted without naming them, in order to formally determine what she would include and exclude in the blog. For example: only amateur photography and video, no art photography, and only video without text.

Notably, in order to create the singular sequential order of the collection in *I'm Google*, Kelberman refuses the potentially fractured nature of tumblr sites that is another feature provided by the software's multiple views of aggregated content.³⁶ In contrast with the common use of tumblr sites for dispersing collections across a variety of access points, the precisely ordered links Kelberman creates rely on viewing her blog as a continuous stream of images in a singular sequence; the primary form of *I'm Google* is the site's main page at dinakelberman.tumblr.com. Artworks within tumblr generally gather content from disparate areas of the Web, and collections accrue as separate web posts over time; therefore any one post does not accurately communicate the identity of the entire artwork. Viewers may visit a site's URL to view an entire accumulated collection in the visual format that the artist has determined, but more commonly users receive updates from creators they follow to the dashboard of their own Tumblr home page. Users' dashboards therefore gather all followed content from diverse tumblr sites into a new visual collection that displays recent posts from all incoming feeds as they appear. As a result, the relationship between whole and parts of a tumblr artwork shifts depending upon the point of access a user chooses for the site. The user's dashboard becomes another collection of collections, and with so many feeds to provide

³⁶Kelberman notes that while tumblr is for rolling content through the Web by reblogging, she uses the site to build a more static website. Dina Kelberman, (artist) in conversation with the author, December 2014.

content, users often will not link back to the original blog to view the entirety. These two distinct options for experiencing the sites produce differing user/viewer experiences, i.e. the “dashboard effect.”

Although the visual form of *I’m Google* prioritizes viewing the site in the form of a single page collecting all images together, the page itself is nevertheless comprised of a dense collection of links, and Kelberman’s strategy in developing this aspect of the site’s identity further informs the visual reading of the work. As a form composed of links and thus inherently reliant on connections, tumblr blogs commonly replicate an inherently unstable element and constant threat to the integrity of the Web which is integral to its architecture. As a collection of unidirectional links, the Web allows for complete freedom in adding documents, but this freedom also introduced the problem of link rot, as there is no integrated mechanism ensuring that whatever is linked to persists in the system. As documents are removed, all incoming links from pages referencing these sources are broken. The potential for decay in webpages thus stems from the very principle of the Web’s openness.

Tumblr artworks, as collections of links, are particularly susceptible to the significant preservation problem of “diffusivity” in internet art, which Ben Fino-Radin, digital conservator at Rhizome, uses to describe “works whose data is not contained within one simple object, works that reference external databases, or dynamic and real-time data sources.”³⁷ These works reflect the nature of the Web as a “format” as David Joselit uses the term in his 2013 work *After Art*. Joselit chooses the term as a clean slate to describe media free of the

³⁷Ben Fino-Radin, “Digital Preservation Practices and the Rhizome Artbase,” *Rhizome.org*, 2011, <http://media.rhizome.org/artbase/documents/Digital-Preservation-Practices-and-the-Rhizome-ArtBase.pdf>, 8.

expectation of discrete objects, which might “expand the definition of art to embrace heterogeneous configurations of relationships or links... formats are nodal connections and differential fields; they channel an unpredictable array of ephemeral currents and charges. They are configurations of force rather than discrete objects. In short, formats establish a pattern of links or connections.”³⁸ In practical terms, however, this unpredictable array causes the potential for link rot which is particularly widespread in tumblr artworks, because of their creators’ frequent inclusion of images reused from other sources, and reliance on the permanence of linked sources, which is not guaranteed.³⁹ Tumblr sites that rely on external links over time instead of saving content to the creator’s own server risk losing the overall integrity of the blog as links break and content becomes unavailable for viewing, disrupting the flow of images which defines a tumblr blog.

Kelberman provides a means for the viewer to visually and functionally explore diffusivity in *I’m Google* by re-integrating the search motif and process into the blog’s links. Kelberman’s blog has sometimes been misinterpreted as a use of Google’s “visually similar” feature, or search-by-image, which was introduced in 2011, but as pointed out above, she primarily discovers her images through text-based keyword searches for images rather than visual resemblances between images. Kelberman explicitly uses the tool of search-by-image, however, to add functionality to the blog as a collection of links. Still images included in the blog have been discovered on the web and saved to Kelberman’s computer; these images are then uploaded once more to the Web as a collection hosted on the tumblr site, which mitigates

³⁸ David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

³⁹ Christiane Paul, “The Myth of Immateriality: Presenting and Preserving New Media,” in Oliver Grau, ed. *MediaArtHistories* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 271.

the risk of broken links from linking away from the blog itself. The images within the grid are still active links, however, which Kelberman uses to “cite her sources” by feeding the image file stored on tumblr’s servers into a reference for an image-based search in Google; each image in the collection links to a search for the original source of the image. This function locates the original source of the image on the Web if it still exists, and also generates a “best guess” text string of keywords describing the image as well, in some cases suggesting for the viewer Kelberman’s process of discovering the images. In the still image links, then, Kelberman adds additional layers of meaning to the operation of the work. For videos, Kelberman does not upload the files she saves, but instead links back to the original files stored on YouTube. As a result, broken links do occur, which Kelberman replaces with an icon she created to notify the user of deleted content.

CONCLUSION: THE MOST INTERESTING THING

*“All of these are found images. To me, that’s the most interesting thing. Someone was compelled to take all of these pictures, or make these videos.”*⁴⁰

In its unfolding as an accumulating sequence steadily connecting images since 2011, *I’m Google* resembles the accrual of relationships over time through which ontologies are built, a bit-by-bit piecing-together rather than attempting to plot out an exhaustive list anticipating all possible definitions within a domain from the start.⁴¹ The categories emerging within this visual classification system convey a dual fascination: the viewer observes recurring interests and patterns across the topics of Kelberman’s searches, while the parameters she established by including only amateur photography and video illuminate just as clearly the interests of those individuals who contributed the original content. Each of Kelberman’s discoveries points out: someone made this, someone chose to share this image. *I’m Google* becomes a portrait in aggregate of the long list of things individuals thought necessary to add to the shared body of knowledge within Tim Berners-Lee’s invention.

What kind of descriptive framework might the categories that grow within an artwork which cultivates its own ontology over time suggest for more formal efforts to develop

⁴⁰ Dina Kelberman, “Artist’s talk”.

⁴¹ David Weinberger, *Everything Is Miscellaneous : the Power of the New Digital Disorder*, 194.

classification and documentation systems for digital works? As Beryl Graham points out, the need for documentation within the contexts of curation, exhibition, interpretation, and preservation for digital art is particularly significant for building a critical history of these transient works, but approaches to developing descriptive frameworks have long wrestled with the diverse and unfixed characteristics of digital media.⁴² Exploring the tension between the need for art movements to be “free-ranging, evolving, and border-crossing, whereas art documentation needs to be structured and defined,” Graham advocates for the evolution of curatorial approaches that recognize the limitations of applying static, medium-based descriptive schemes to digital artworks.⁴³

As a possible step toward resolving persistent incongruity between digital works and the terms applied to them in order to develop alternatives to existing international standards that reinscribe a material orientation and medium-based taxonomic structures via object-centered categories such as “date, size, and materials,” Graham examines the influence on institutional approaches of curators and artists working in close proximity. Graham sees potential for such close working relationships to reshape curatorial thinking toward thematic categories, particularly if curators recognize artists’ inclination to resist any named characteristics of digital media, and resist entrenched tendencies to define categories too narrowly within expectations about “the digital” as an orientation.⁴⁴

⁴² Beryl Graham, “Redefining Digital Art Disrupting Borders” in Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage a Critical Discourse*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 105.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Beryl Graham, “Redefining Digital Art Disrupting Borders,” 104.

Graham also points out the enduring interest among digital artists in investigating the physicality of bodily experience through immaterial forms.⁴⁵ As discussed above, Kelberman's examinations of everyday objects mine the specificity of relationships between digital images to conjure material properties. Moreover, many of the most interesting things in *I'm Google* are artifacts or demonstrations of other people's creative processes. In addition to the qualities of the made objects themselves, Kelberman's investigations within this theme include meditations on the physical sensations within materials and processes as experiences. In these sequences, Kelberman develops the possibility for immaterial digital art to invoke the physical world by relating to the viewer's memory of physical experience elsewhere.

Returning to the sequence analyzed at the beginning and throughout this paper demonstrates how these connected images also generate a nuanced exploration of the variety and complexity of movements that take place within the rhythms and physical processes of making, adding a sense of tactility to the visual vocabulary of *I'm Google*. (fig. 8: <http://dinakelberman.tumblr.com/>) From the industrial process of the molten nickel ball, for example, a transition from manufacturing to possible food preparation occurs via a switch from the grasping implements of tweezers, to fingers appearing from the opposite direction in the same location with the rectangle, grasping an eggshell hemisphere cradling a yolk. The image of the hand establishes the context of kinds of touch explored in the subsequent sequence of hands separating yolks from whites, until another image of a yolk, removed from the context of food because stained green, provides a transition to a new register within the haptic range:

⁴⁵ Also in contrast to the thematic categories Graham points out, which tend to set expectations for the content of digital artwork within the properties of digital media as forms, such as "connectivity," "gaming", "telepresence."

hands manipulating clay- and putty-like materials of varied hues. Through these hands, Kelberman explores kinds of pressure and ways of manipulating clay's density: pulling/stretching a hank of golden putty, poking a dense field of pockmarks into a pale blue slab, a complicated wringing between both hands, the draping of a shiny flexible slab, the squeezing of a putty blob inside a fist, then between two fists, and as punctuation concluding the sequence: a child's hand pressing flat against a putty pancake, a gesture simply saying: "stop."

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